

Faith and Doubt
John 20:19-31
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Wow, wasn't last weekend wonderful? We had a tremendous egg hunt, a great Easter breakfast and two amazing worship services. The lilies filled the sanctuary, the parking lot was full, I ate way too much Easter candy. It was great! In fact, that may be the best Easter I can remember here at CCC. I wish every Sunday could be Easter.

But it's not, is it? Today isn't Easter, it's the Sunday after Easter. The lilies are gone, the parking lot isn't nearly as full, and there's not quite as much Easter candy left. Things have changed since last week. Last week it was easy to shout "He is risen!" and truly believe in God's resurrection power.

But now a week has gone by, a week filled with harsh reminders that life still goes on, regardless of what last Sunday was like. There are still bills to be paid and deaths to deal with and things to get done. Life has changed since last Sunday. And they've changed for the disciples, as well. We aren't reading about rolled away stones and empty tombs and dazzling angels. No, today it's fearful disciples and locked doors and disturbing doubts.

But once again, the disciples have underestimated their leader. Jesus comes to them through locked doors and offers them what they need most at this hour -- peace. Jesus also has some follow-up instructions for them: "As the father has sent me, so I send you." He breathes into them the Holy Spirit, anointing them to do God's work, the forgiving of sins.

So there we have it! The disciples' fear is wiped away by the risen Lord and replaced with peace and assurance and a sending forth to be the church and spread God's love and forgiveness and everybody lives happily ever after. A nice, tidy ending to our story.

Except for Thomas. While the other disciples were getting their marching orders, Thomas was AWOL. We are not sure where he was, why he wasn't with the others. We all deal with grief in different ways. Maybe he was praying, maybe he was getting drunk, maybe he just needed to be alone. Whatever the reason, Thomas wasn't there.

When the disciples came to him with their glorious news, all filled with excitement and stumbling to get their words out, Thomas refused to believe. There are a lot of things in life we'll believe without seeing, but for Thomas, a resurrected savior is not one of those things. "Show me," he says and thus earns the unfortunate nickname Doubting Thomas, as if the struggle to believe was a bad thing.

Now, there are probably some people who'd boo me right out of the pulpit for saying that. They'd say that there's no place in church for doubt, because that shows weakness and a lack of commitment to God. They're the people with the bumper stickers on their car that say, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it!", people who aren't afraid to tell you what's wrong with your belief and what's right with theirs.

But the Bible has in it a rich history of doubters, and Thomas is just taking his place alongside other folks whose faith grew through doubt. Doubting Abraham laughed in disbelief when God told him his 90-year-old wife Sarah was going to give birth. Doubting Moses told God several times that he had the wrong guy when God tapped him

to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. And Doubting Peter asked Jesus to let him walk across the Sea of Galilee, but got a nose full of sea water when he started to doubt. Abraham doubted. Moses doubted. Peter and the rest of the disciples doubted. So if you have doubts about God, you're in good company, and we can add Thomas to that list. If those people doubted, and they made it into the final printing of the Bible, then having doubts can't be all wrong, can it?

Clarence Darrow once wrote, "Just think of the tragedy of teaching children not to doubt." I don't believe in a doubtless faith. To have a doubtless faith you either have to be perfect, which none of us are, or so narrow-minded that there's no room for questions, which none of us are, either. We're all like Thomas, we all have faith, we all want to believe, but sometimes we need something more than words or books; we need to experience Christ. Doubt is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of a strong, vibrant faith, a searching and active faith. Frederick Beuchner once said, "Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith. It keeps us awake and moving."

I think all of us, when faced with the story of the resurrection, respond at some level with incredulity. How can you not? What we're talking about is physically impossible. I heard a comedian recently talk about how we take things for granted. He said, "I heard a lady complaining the other day about how her plane sat on the runway for 40 minutes before takeoff. I wanted to say to her, 'And then what did you do? Did you FLY through the AIR?'" The comedian said, "Everybody on every plane should constantly be going, 'Oh my gosh! Wow! We're flying!'"

I think our world has made us jaded to the miracles around us like technology and flight. We've come to expect those things to happen without a second thought. And when it comes to resurrection, we've heard the story so many times that we're prone to hear it without realizing the magnitude of what has happened. You have to put yourself in Thomas' sandals. If someone came up to you and said, "The guy we watched die on cross three days ago is walking through walls and bringing us words of peace," how can you respond with anything but, "I don't believe it"? This is not expected, this is not the same old stuff, this is anything but ordinary.

But how many of us left the sanctuary last week going, "Resurrection? I don't believe it!" A man rose from the dead. He was dead. Now he's alive. Every one of us, everybody who professes belief in Christ, should constantly be going, "Oh my gosh! Wow! Resurrection!"

In a sense, that's what Thomas does. After expressing his doubt, he's not shunned or ridiculed. He's not told he just needs to have more faith. Jesus takes his doubt seriously and answers Thomas. He comes to him and says, "See my hands? See my side? See what I did for you? Touch and believe." And Thomas responds with the greatest statement of faith in the whole Bible: "My lord and my God!"

Despite his doubts, or maybe because of them, Thomas did find a deeper, richer faith. Do you know when, though? It wasn't on Easter Sunday. It was eight days after Easter. That would be tomorrow. That's pretty significant. Can you think of a less inspirational day to come to faith than a Monday? It's easy to believe on Easter, when the placed is packed and the choir is rocking and the joy is overflowing. On Easter, it's easy to cry out, "My Lord and my God!"

But have you ever tried doing it eight days after Easter? On a Monday, of all days? When the lilies are gone, when the all that's left in the Easter basket is some plastic

green grass. Can we still make the same confession now that we made last Sunday? A naïve faith can't do that. I believe only a faith that has asked the tough questions and persevered in the search for answers can proclaim Jesus as messiah eight days after Easter. I bet those were a long eight days for Thomas. Some folks probably won't make it that far; the crowds are already thinning out from last week.

But I believe Jesus built the church around folks like Thomas. People who doubt are the cornerstone of the church, people who hear the Good News and scratch their head and say, "Risen? No, I can't believe it." Christ's church is meant to be made up of people with ants in their pants, whose faith is kept awake and moving by their questions and the search for answers.

And I believe Jesus answers us. Just as Thomas was given the invitation to touch and feel, we are given the invitation to taste and see. Each time we come to communion, we are reminded that the risen Christ is among us, bringing peace, offering forgiveness, sharing the Holy Spirit. Communion is our opportunity to ask our questions, name our fears, hear words of assurance like "This is my body, broken for you," and then to respond faithfully. When you taste the bread, when you drink the cup, that is Christ saying to you, "I am here."

There's one more quote from Frederick Beuchner worth sharing. He said, "An agnostic is someone who is not sure whether there is a God. That is some of us all of the time, and all of us some of the time." If he's right, and my experience tells me he is, at some point in our lives, we all doubt. Look at this world we live in. How can we not at times have doubt? If Thomas, who was there, still doubted, how can we, even the most faithful among us, not doubt when faced with the reality of life?

I hope you have doubts. I hope you have persistent questions about God. I hope you never are faced with the awesomeness of God's work and say, "Yep, I believe it." I hope you keep asking questions and voicing concerns and expressing doubts until one day you experience something so wonderful, so amazing, so life-changing, that your only response then will be "My Lord and my God!" Maybe, as we come to the table, that day will be today.

